FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
NOVEMBER 24, 2002

DOXOLOGY
John M. Buchanan

The world is alive with your goodness, O God,
it grows green from the ground
and ripens into the roundness of fruit.
Its taste and its touch
enliven my body and stir my soul.
Generously given
profusely displayed
your graces of goodness pour forth from the earth.
As I have received
so free me to give.
As I have been granted
so may I give.

J. Philip Newell
Celtic Benedictions

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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DOXOLGOY
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 67
Matthew 6:25-33
Psalm 100

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord."
Psalm 100:1 (NRSV)

Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God.
In this season of Thanksgiving, we come to you with grateful hearts.
Speak the word your have for us this day.
Startle us, again, with your goodness and mercy and grace,
and the goodness of the world, our home: in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For more than a century, week in and week out, the people of this congregation have begun their hour or so together by standing up and singing the Doxology:

> Praise God from whom all blessing flow.
> Praise him all creatures here below.
> Praise him above ye heavenly hosts.
> Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

We did a little research and came up with a worship bulletin dated October 14, 1900, the oldest one in our archives and there it was, at the beginning of the service, exactly where it still is....

Doxology, the word itself, means praise. The tune we use was composed in 1551 by Louis Bourgeois, John Calvin's choirmaster in Geneva. And in 1560, William Kethe, a Scot and friend of John Knox, took Bourgeois' tune and wrote a paraphrase of Psalm 100 and the resulting hymn is "Old Hundredth"—the oldest hymn in English still in use. We'll sing it later this morning, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims would have sung it, in all probability, at their Thanksgiving feast.

> All people that on earth do dwell
> Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
> Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell,
> Come ye before him and rejoice.

Many of us have sung the Doxology once a week all our lives. It occurred to me that I have sung this tune and these words more than any other. Just for the fun of it, I did the math. If I started

singing at the age of five—in those long ago days before church nurseries, when children sat, wiggled, struggled, and suffered through worship, sitting beside their parents—if I started singing when I was five and missed a few Sundays every year, and few years during college, I've probably sung the Doxology something like 3000 times, which is probably about as useless a bit of information as you'll receive today.

Garrison Keillor's wonderful monologues on *A Prairie Home Companion* are often about religion and regularly, I find, about grace and gratitude and doxology. In a particularly delightful piece he explained that "car ownership in Lake Wobegon is a matter of faith." Lutherans drive Fords, bought from Bunson Motors, the Lutheran car dealer, and Catholics drive Chevrolets from Main Garage, owned by the Kruegers, who are Catholic. The Brethren—Keillor's own people—being Protestant, also drove Fords but distinguished themselves from the Lutherans by attaching small Scripture plates to the top of their license plates. The verses were written in tiny glass beads so they showed up well at night. The favorite was "The wages of sin is death" (Roman 6:23). Keillor's father's car sported a compass on the dashboard with "I Am the Way" inscribed in luminescent letters across its face, which he said were "clearly visible in the dark to a girl who might be sitting beside him."

But the real champion among the Lake Woebegon Church of Brethren people was Brother Louie, whose four-door Fairlane was a rolling display of Scripture—on the license plates, across the dashboard, on the sun visors, arm rest, floor mats, ashtray, and glove compartment.

Louie's tour de force, however, was the car horn. He found a company in Indiana that advertised custom-made musical car horns. Louie's horn played the first eight notes of the Doxology. It sounded like a trumpet. He blew it at pedestrians, at oncoming traffic, while passing, and sometimes just for his own pleasure. "On occasion, vexed by a fellow driver, he gave in to wrath and leaned on the horn, only to hear 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.' It calmed him down right away" (*Lake Wobegon Days*).

My favorite Doxology story is a baseball anecdote. In 1988, the Los Angels Dodgers won the National League Championship and the World Series. The Dodgers had a great pitcher by the name of Orel Hersheiser, a mild-looking young man whose nickname was "Bulldog" because of his fierce competitiveness. In 1988 Hersheiser won about every award a pitcher can. He pitched 63 consecutive scoreless innings, still a record. In the World Series, he started and won several games. Orel Hersheiser was the Most Valuable Player and the toast of the baseball world. He was a guest on the *Tonight Show.* Johnny Carson was interviewing him and asked how he, Hersheiser, seemed to stay so calm and steady and focused in those incredibly tense, pressured situations, out there on the pitcher's mound, alone, with 50,000 screaming fans and millions of people watching on television. Hersheiser's answer stunned Carson. "I sing a hymn," Hersheiser said. "I'm a Presbyterian and so I sing a hymn to myself out there that we sing every Sunday in church." Carson was momentarily speechless and then asked if Hersheiser would sing it—on NBC-TV—and he did. And what he sang, of course: "Praise God from whom all blessing flow"—the Doxology.

I don't suppose you and I think much about it when we rise weekly and begin worship together by singing the Doxology, but what we are doing in that act is profoundly important. We are saying what we believe and trust at a fundamental level in our souls. We are declaring our ultimate loyalty and devotion. And we are declaring who we are as individual men and women by singing our praise to the One who created us, from whom all blessings flow, and whose, finally and ultimately, we are.

The Bible is a consistent and persistent advocate of the act of praise and giving thanks. Praise is basic to what the Bible is about. In fact, the Bible is insistent, almost pushy about it. We are commanded to praise God, to fall down on our faces, to sing, shout, clap our hands, wave branches, blow trumpets, pluck strings, bang cymbals together—loud, clashing cymbals. We are commanded to "make a joyful noise" for God and to join our voices with the sounds of nature, with thunder, and noisy wind, crashing waves—what biologist Lewis Thomas once called the "grand canonical ensemble of nature." All nature sings in praise to God. Little hills shout, trees clap their hands, and forests sing a mighty chorus. I've never actually heard that, but I have sat back and looked up into a stately tall beech tree and been moved to wonder and gratitude.

Poet Wendell Berry lifted his eyes to a grove of magnificent trees and wrote:

> Great trees, outspreading and upright,
> Apostles of the living light,
> Patient as stars, they build in air,
> Tier after tier a timbered choir,
> Stout leaves upholding weightless grace
> Of song, a blessing in this place.
> ("A Timbered Choir")

C. S. Lewis thought that what we need most as humans beings is Doxology. He wrote that "God is that object to admire which is to be awake, . . . not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all." Lewis said that our lives are incomplete and crippled if we are tone deaf and have never been in love, never known true friendship, never cared for a good book, never felt the morning air on our cheeks. "Praise is inner health made audible," Lewis said.

All of that is what is going on when we open our lives and spirits to Doxology. And there is a sense in which it is a countercultural act, an affirmation that is subversive to the values of materialistic, consumer-based culture. We live and move and have our being in a culture that evaluates us, places us in the social spectrum, defines and identifies us on the basis of what we earn, own, and consume. And over against that prevailing ethos, this simple radical act says I belong to God. My ultimate loyalty is to God. My most basic identity as a human being comes from the One who created me and who is the life and love behind all of creation.

"We need the biggest dose of God we can get," writes Marva Dawn, a professor of theology at Notre Dame, "to shake us out of our societal sloth and summon us to behold God's splendor." Sometimes that's hard to do, living in a city. We are removed from the natural world the Bible

talks about. And besides, our religion has been suspicious of nature as fallen creation, the arena of temptation, worldliness, and sin.

There is a current movement in Western Christianity, however, to recover the ancient church's and Israel's and the Bible's focus on creation, nature, the world as a place to see God and know God. It is part of our own roots in Celtic spirituality. When Christianity encountered the indigenous people of northern Great Britain and Scotland in the second and third centuries, there was a wonderful mixing of Christian theology and Celtic custom, focused on nature. Celtic art, music, jewelry, and literature flourished in the early Christian monasteries. The wonderful Celtic crosses that have become a symbol of Presbyterianism are the product of Celtic art and Christian theology. Celtic Christianity emphasized the goodness of creation, all of it, including human life and the gracious goodness of God, which can be seen in the natural world as well as in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Historians of religion tell us that the Celtic way of perceiving the world, that Celtic style of spirituality, was pushed aside in the fifth century by the orthodox Roman theology, which emphasized original sin, the fallenness of creation, and therefore the otherworldliness of Christianity and the Christian church. Much of the church's discomfort with the world, with humanness, with human sexuality, comes from that theological conflict. Priests in the Celtic church married, for instance. Rome insisted on celibacy and, of course, prevailed. A good illustration of the two ways of viewing the world and the faith has to do with contrasting images of a newborn. Roman Christianity, under the enormous influence of Augustine, saw in a newborn original sin, total depravity, a fallen human being who needed to be rescued from sin and death. Celtic Christianity, on the other hand, saw in the face of a newborn, something of the face of God, "the unsullied goodness of creation," is the way J. Philip Newell, a leading Celtic theologian puts it.

Both ways of perceiving are true, but happily, after centuries of Christian suspicion of the natural, material world of the flesh, we are recovering the earlier emphasis on nature as the theater of God's ongoing creativity and redemptive grace. Scottish theologian George McDonald writes, "We should look not only to the Scriptures and the church to know God, but to creation as well."

On the day I was reading that, I had an opportunity to do it. I held on my lap, at bedtime, a six-year-old. He gets to choose the "before bed book" we'll read and had visited the appropriate shelf of children's books. He didn't like the choices there and so he moved one shelf over and of all things picked up *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe.* It was published by the Templeton Foundation and contains amazing pictures of outer space taken and transmitted by the Hubble telescope. The pictures are colorful, amazing, and dramatic—pictures of exploding stars and galaxies, bright lights against the absolute blackness of space. I didn't think he'd stay with it long, but he did; couldn't see enough, in fact. We oooed and awed through the whole book, and it was, I concluded, as good as an hour in church.

Michael Reagen was the editor and publisher of the book, and in the forward he wrote,

> My overwhelming impression [at first seeing the Hubble photographs] was one of awe at the majesty of the universe and a sense that I was witnessing the hand of God at work on

a scale that was mind-boggling. . . . When I look at this material I have a great sense of relief, an almost surreal sense that it's going to be okay, we are not alone, and there is a God.

Doxology. It is our oldest, most basic religious practice, theological tradition, and personal affirmation. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples begins with it: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." One of the oldest and most sacred traditions of our Jewish neighbors is based on the ancient prayer of David, in 1 Chronicles 2a: "Blessed are thou, O Lord, our God." We've heard our friend, Rabbi Michael Sternfield pray it here in our sanctuary. The Hebrew is easy: "Baruch atah Adonai" — "Blessed are thou, O Lord, our God." The ancient Jewish custom is perfect for Thanksgiving week. The faithful are encouraged to pray the prayer 100 times daily—all day long: "Baruch atah Adonai" and then fill in the blanks with the good stuff of life and the world as we encounter it [See Marva Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time*, p. 210).

- Baruch atah Adonai, blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, for this day
- Baruch atah Adonai, blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, for the sun coming up over the lake
- Baruch atah Adonai, blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, for my life and body, for my heart and lungs, which have been faithfully doing their job all night long
- Baruch atah Adonai, blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, for bright stars, the moon over the lake last night
- Baruch atah Adonai, blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, for trees and flowers, for birds, for that dear friend, for this precious child
- Baruch atah Adonai, for the beauty of that hymn, the taste of this food, for the voice of that dear friend, the touch of my beloved's hand

The remarkable thing about the biblical command to praise and thank God, to make a joyful noise and come into God's presence with thanksgiving, is that it is mostly written by people who had precious little to be cheerful and joyful about. Many of the most glorious psalms of thanksgiving were written at times of tragedy, exile, and suffering. In fact, there is something about doxology that is more powerful and more authentic when it is experienced and expressed not in the good times, when it's easy to be grateful, but in the not so good times. There is something absolutely authentic when words of gratitude are uttered in the face of loss and diminishment and tragedy, something almost magnificently defiant about gratitude in adversity. That, after all, was the way it was originally.

Peter Gomes, reflects this in his new book, *The Good Life*: "That first winter in New England was a terrible one for the Mayflower pilgrims, who were hardly prepared for the ferocity of the weather and the hard work of establishing a new colony. More than half their number died that winter in what they called 'the starving time,' where a ration of five kernels of corn was apportioned to each adult for a meal."

It was the next year, when a successful harvest was in, that they set aside a day for Thanksgiving. It's important to remember that just a few months before they were facing starvation, digging

graves in the rocky soil for their children, wives, husbands; that as they sat down to eat a Thanksgiving feast together their hearts were still broken from the grief and trauma.

Gomes, who grew up in Plymouth, says that a local custom is that on Thanksgiving Day, in the middle of the bountiful tables, five kernels of corn placed on a red maple leaf are set at each place to remind people, who now enjoy a good bounty, of the "starving time" of long ago (p. 151).

For some of us, Thanksgiving will be a time of joyful reunion with dear ones, a time of being together with precious friends, a time of feasting, laughing, rejoicing, a time when doxology, "Baruch atah Adonai,," will fall easily and gracefully from our lips. For others Thanksgiving will be lonely, a time of loss and grief, a heightened time of anxiety, perhaps fear and worry. For those, particularly, doxology, thanksgiving, will be an occasion of integrity and faithfulness and blessing.

For all of us, it is an occasion to praise God from whom all blessing flow, to express our gratitude for love and mercy beyond our comprehension, for all the blessing of our life, for Jesus Christ, our Lord, and for God's amazing grace in our lives.

> All people that on earth do dwell,
> Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
> Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell.
> Come ye before him and rejoice.

Amen.